

Green initiatives need to be made compulsory

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Malaysians may not be ignorant about the importance of green or sustainable construction but what they know about such initiatives is not translated into much-needed implementation. That is what Green Real Estate (GreenRE) Sdn Bhd chief operating officer Ashwin Thurairajah shares in a virtual interview.

“For the most part, [green practices] are voluntary at the moment but we hope this changes. There must be awareness and pull factors, which is why we developed a homeowner’s guide to green homes,” he notes. He points out that the GreenRE Homeowners’ Guide to a Green Home contains simple suggestions that homeowners can adopt and they can gauge their green home levels using the scoring matrix provided.

GreenRE was set up by the Real Estate and Housing Developers’ Association (Rehda) in 2013 to drive sustainability in Malaysia’s real estate industry. It currently offers green building certification for residential buildings (landed homes and high-rise developments) and non-residential structures (industrial facilities, hospitals, data centres and so on), as well as townships and infrastructure.

“When we talk about a green home, it’s not just about the design of the building; it’s the operation, the maintenance — how the users and occupants of the building partake in activities that can further amplify the [energy] savings and improve environmental performance,” he says.

GreenRE sales and marketing manager Juanita Lourdes says it is not just about how Malaysian homeowners are faring in terms of adopting the green and eco-friendly initiatives in their homes, but also about management efficiency.

“Take, for example, waste management. To sort the amount of waste, homeowners are given a yellow basket to put in their recyclable items, but it’s too small. And people basically sort [their trash] but are unaware of what is recyclable or where it goes or even what happens to the recyclable materials,” she says.

Ashwin says the GreenRE homeowners’ guide is meant for those who are “looking to retrofit or upgrade” their homes and there are no plans to monetise the guide.

“It is aimed more at landed homes — a lot of the criteria [in the guide] will be more applicable to those living in a landed development as they will have more control than those in a high-rise development. But the best practices can be adopted by everyone.”

The best practices, according to the guide, include average electricity usage of less than 112kWh per month per individual, doing full loads of laundry to reduce the number of times you use your washing machine, setting your air-conditioner temperature at between 23°C and 25°C for optimum cooling, ironing a larger number of clothes to reduce the number of times you switch on your iron, organising the contents of your fridge to allow more efficient air circulation and completely switching off computers and laptops when not in use as appliances on stand-by mode consume energy.

Ashwin says in terms of awareness, Malaysians are still in the initial stages. Property buyers prioritise price and location, so there is a need for sustainability to be among their top five priorities.



GreenRE’s suggestions for cost-effective ways to green your homes

1 CHANGE YOUR AIR CONDITIONER USAGE HABITS

Put a timer control that will switch off the air conditioner after two or three hours. Air-conditioner temperature should be set at 23°C to 25°C and turned off at night as the night temperature can drop to 22°C to 23°C.

2 USE WINDOWS

Open your windows at night. Concerns about security, rain and mosquitoes can be resolved by installing grilles, shadings and mosquito netting.

3 RADIANT COOLING

Install a radiant cooling system. Chilled water pipes around the perimeter of the building can have a cooling effect on the building, so less energy is needed to reach the desired temperature.

4 NIGHT-TIME PURGING

Night-time purging refers to drawing cool air into a building to dissipate stored heat via convection. In simple terms, this refers to facilitating cross ventilation (opening windows) or stack ventilation (extract fan on roof) to pre-cool a building space at night prior to the operation of a mechanical cooling system. Subsequently, the load on the mechanical cooling system will be reduced owing to cooler air temperature within the building space.

5 USE LED LIGHTS

Replace your bulbs with an LED equivalent as they do not result in a great difference in cost and they last longer than regular bulbs.

6 SOLAR PANELS

Renewable energy has never been cheaper and costs will continue to drop. Solar panels are passive devices that can last for around 25 years. Homeowners can also opt for net metering.

7 INCORPORATE MORE GREENERY

Tree shade and greenery have a great cooling effect.

8 CHOOSE LIGHTER COLOURS FOR YOUR HOME

Lighter colours reflect heat better.

9 REDUCE WATER USAGE

The United Nations recommends between 50 and 100 litres of water per person per day for personal and domestic uses. Get rainwater harvesting tanks and use rainwater instead of potable water for non-consumption uses.



What is a green home?

- Alternative Energy**
(Solar Panel)
- Insulated/Cool Roofing**
- LED Lighting**
- Energy Rated Appliances**
- Front Load Washing Machines**
- Glazed Windows**
- Low/Zero VOC Paint & Flooring**
- Dual Flush Toilets**
- Rainwater Harvesting**
- Light Coloured Exterior Walls**
- Native Plants**



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affordability is the issue. So, something has to be done about that — either grants, tax incentives or even financing.”

While there are interest-free instalment plans for consumer goods for short tenures, there are very few financing options for bigger purchases such as solar panels. Another aspect, Ashwin comments, would be the standards that are set, adding that regulatory bodies in Malaysia should “start raising the bar” for electrical appliances.

“As an example, the Energy Commission has a five-star energy rating system for domestic air conditioners. [However,] our five-star-rated air conditioners are less efficient than a one-tick-rated one in Singapore,” he says.

He adds that the low standards might be used to protect local manufacturers but this just allows inefficient products to be sold.

Lourdes says greening existing homes can be a gradual process because such initiatives, especially when it comes to purchasing electrical appliances, can be costly.

“Let’s say in the next few years you need to change your air conditioners. Make sure they are at least three stars, if you don’t want to get five. And if your roof needs repairing, then consider backing insulation. It can be a long-term plan in the next five to 10 years and the costs for all these items can be spread out — it needs to be financially feasible.”

Both Lourdes and Ashwin highlight that behavioural changes also play a big part

“[The lack of awareness] is mainly because there’s a lack of coordination, education and a systematic way to approach this topic. It’s very wide-ranging. There are many things that you can do but in isolation, they don’t really have much of an impact. So, it’s important [to take] a holistic approach,” he adds.

When there is no demand from the market for green initiatives, and without the push from the government, developers will not see the need to adhere to green building criteria and obtain certification, Ashwin states.

Affordability and low standards

Education is key to achieving awareness and those who are affected by the consequences of climate change will be more likely to adopt and push for green initiatives, says Ashwin.

“Maybe some people are less affected than others, so there is a divide in terms of how comfortable you are versus how desperate you need to be to tackle the problem. Someone who was directly impacted by the recent floods would probably change their habits a lot quicker than someone [living] in a [non-affected] location,” he says, adding that governmental push and coordination are critical.

“If you ask most Malaysians about energy efficiency and renewable energy, they wouldn’t mind adopting such measures but



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in greening homes and that some people are already unknowingly participating in green initiatives, but they lack the means to gauge their level of implementation.

Diverse aspects of green initiatives

According to Ashwin, the number of residential buildings certified by GreenRE are very small compared with the total number of building stock in Malaysia.

“We have a huge existing building stock, and the trend towards going green, at least on the property development side, started only in 2009. It was not compulsory at the time. It’s still voluntary for the most part but a number of local authorities, such as [city councils] DBKL and MBPJ, have started imposing [green criteria] on new developments,” he says.

However, financing institutions are pushing green initiatives, Ashwin states.

“Even when the government is not doing it very aggressively, the banking sector is. Bank Negara Malaysia has introduced a classification mechanism for all banks to classify their lending, which is based on climate change principles. It’s critical to developers now because if they want to get financing, they will need to comply with certain [green] components,” he explains.

Ashwin says overseas developers and investors are focusing on ESG (environmental,

social and governance) reporting. They are no longer just taking into consideration the bottom line but also how well the supply chain is being treated, the governance aspect and, of course, the major pillar, which is the environmental part.

Going green includes aspects such as minimising embodied and operational carbon as well as good access to public transport and indirect carbon impact savings, he notes.

“High-density developments are also encouraged to reduce urban sprawl. This is also about going green and falls within the framework we are talking about,” Ashwin adds.

Government needs to play its part

Ashwin believes coordination and enforcement are needed when it comes to green initiatives.

“Enforcement is important. There is no point in having laws but no enforcement. For example, there’s an amendment to our building bylaws that requires all new developments to include some of the green features mentioned but they are not being incorporated as there is no inspection by the authorities,” he says.

He adds that there must be more incentives to encourage the adoption of green initiatives, after which enforcement needs to be applied.

Among the incentives he mentions is the Sustainability Achieved Via Energy Efficiency (SAVE) 3.0 programme by the Sustainable Energy Development Authority (SEDA) Malaysia. According to SEDA Malaysia’s website, the programme, which runs from January to December 2022, grants domestic households an e-rebate of up to RM400 for the purchase of electrical appliances with a four- or five-star energy efficiency rating from the Energy Commission.

MBPJ also offers a rebate of either 100% or up to RM500, whichever is lower, on assessment tax per year for those who comply with its green guidelines.

Ashwin notes that incentives are mostly targeted at developers, so there is a need to provide inducements for end-users as well.

Lourdes says there is still a need for the authorities to come up with laws and regulations, adding that people will not adopt green initiatives “unless they are made compulsory”, owing mainly to the general public’s understanding that climate change is still in the early stages.

“In the last five years, there have been many green movements in Malaysia because of the end-users and the younger generation coming on board the movement. We are quite optimistic for the next five years [when it comes to the embracing of green initiatives].”